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A Private Room

A Play in Two Parts

BY

ARTHUR PINERO

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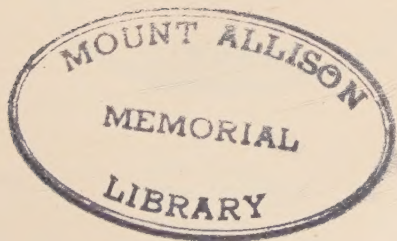
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THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

Produced on May 14th, 1928, at The Little Theatre, London.

GENERAL SIR GEORGE DARENTH, K.C.B.	<i>C. M. Lowne</i>
CARLTON BELCHER.	<i>Ben Field</i>
PIETRO VITELLI (Proprietor of the Café Costanza) }	<i>Murri Moncrieff</i>
A WAITER.	<i>E. A. Walker</i>
LADY CHINNERY.	<i>Olga Lindo</i>

SCENE: A Private Room at the Café Costanza, the well-known Restaurant in Soho.

PART I: Before Dinner. PART II: After Dinner.

The Curtain falls between the Parts, but only for a few moments.



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A PRIVATE ROOM

The scene is a room on the first-floor of a London restaurant. The decorations, once gay, of the walls and ceiling are time-worn and dingy, and the ornate furniture is in the same condition.

In the centre of the back wall a door opens into the room from a narrow passage. On the left is the fireplace, where an unlighted gas-stove is partly hidden by a small painted screen; over the mantelpiece is a mirror in a gaudy frame; and against the opposite wall a console-table supports another mirror of a similar kind.

Standing against the wall on either side of the fireplace is a chair, and in the middle of the room there is a square table on which is spread a spotlessly clean white cloth. A vase containing summer flowers is on the table and a menu-card of a dinner. Against the wall at the back, between the door and the left-hand corner, is a sideboard. On it are knives, forks, spoons, plates, wine and liqueur glasses and tumblers, cruets, salt-cellars and pepper-casters, a basket of rolls and a dish of butter, some peaches wrapped in cotton-wool and packed in a wooden box, a plate-warmer in bright metal—not yet heated—and a couple of salvers, a carafe of water, a pile of serviettes, an ash-tray and a bowl of matches, and a printed wine-list in a leather cover.

A third chair is against the wall on the nearer side of the console-table, and at a short distance from the console-table, set obliquely towards the spectator, is a settee. Behind the farther end of the settee is a little round table, and in the right-hand corner of the room a stand for hanging hats and coats.

Electric sconces are on the walls, but their lamps are not burning, and a gleam of sun thrown into the room from

the direction of the fourth wall shows that it is still daylight.

The door is wide open.

(NOTE:—Throughout, “right” and “left” are the spectators’ right and left, not the actor’s.)

(VITELLI and a waiter are laying the square table for a dinner for two persons, the waiter bringing the things from the sideboard—polishing the spoons and forks, etc., with his napkin as he does so—and VITELLI helping to place them. Presently CARLTON BELCHER, a flashy specimen of the middle-aged “man about town,” in evening dress, overcoat and hat, swaggers along the passage from the right. Catching sight of VITELLI, he halts in the doorway.)

BELCHER. Hullo, Peter!

VITELLI. (*A grey-haired, moustachioed man of fifty, speaking English fluently but with the clearness and precision of a foreigner.*) Ah, good evening, Mr. Belcher. I hope you are well, sir. You have not been to see us for a long while.

BELCHER. (*Entering, but remaining by the door—in an aggrieved tone.*) This room’s booked for to-night, they tell me downstairs.

VITELLI. I am extremely sorry, Mr. Belcher. It is most unfortunate. But the nice Chinese room—we are preparing that for you.

BELCHER. (*Advancing.*) Rotten hole!

VITELLI. Ah, no, no, Mr. Belcher! Many people think the Chinese room a better room than this one. Some of my customers like the Chinese room so much, they beg for it.

BELCHER. (*Eyeing the square table.*) How many are dinin’ heah?

VITELLI. Two, Mr. Belcher.

BELCHER. And I’m six, damitall! Couldn’t you put this little lot in the Chinese room? My party ain’t sardines, deah lad.

VITELLI. (*Flourishing his hands.*) It is impossible; quite impossible. (*To the waiter, sotto voce.*) Mellone.

(The waiter goes out, disappearing on the right.)

BELCHER. *(To VITELLI.)* Beastly noosance! You've had a day's notice. I rang up early this mornin'.

VITELLI. *(Putting the finishing touches to the laying of the table.)* A day's notice! The gentleman who dines here this evening, Mr. Belcher, has given forty years' notice.

BELCHER. What d'yer mean—forty years'—?

VITELLI. It is a fact. Forty years ago he arranged with my father to dine in this room with a lady the first Monday in every July, unless he happened to be abroad on service, and then he would dine the night after his return. *(BELCHER seats himself on the settee and VITELLI comes to him and stands near him.)* I have known him five-and-twenty years—from the time I came into the business.

BELCHER. On service? Ol' soldier?

VITELLI. *(Shrugging his shoulders.)* He was not always old. My father used to say that when General Dar-rent—ah, I have let the cat out of the bag!—when he first patronized the Café Costanza he was the liveliest and the handsomest young fellow in London. *(Mournfully.)* Now he is over eighty, poor man, according to the papers.

BELCHER. General—who is he?

VITELLI. *(After a look round—dropping his voice.)* Dar-rent—Sir George Dar-rent—Darenth—I cannot pronounce it properly—

BELCHER. B'lieve I passed him outside, hangin' about for his gal. *(Wagging his head.)* Naughty, naughty!

VITELLI. Why naughty, Mr. Belcher?

BELCHER. At his age, dinin' with a bit o' fluff in a private room!

VITELLI. Ah, you do not understand. I must explain. It is rather peculiar. The lady is always the same lady.

BELCHER. The same——!

VITELLI. The same.

BELCHER. And they've dined heah together for forty years ?

VITELLI. (*Nodding.*) Yes.

BELCHER. (*Disgusted.*) Shuh ! His missus.

VITELLI. (*With conviction.*) No, she is not his missus. He does not behave to her as a gentleman behaves to his missus. Oh, it is very peculiar——!

(*The waiter returns, carrying a Cantaloup melon on ice.*)

THE WAITER. (*To VITELLI, putting the melon on the sideboard.*) Ze lady and ghentle-man.

VITELLI. (*Hurrying to the sideboard.*) Ha—— !

BELCHER. (*Rising and moving to the door.*) I'll leave yer. Don't forget my humble crowd, Peter.

VITELLI. (*Cutting two substantial wedges from the melon.*) No fear, Mr. Belcher. I will wait on you and your friends myself by and by.

BELCHER. Thanks. Cheerio !

(*He departs, going to the left. Scarcely has he vanished when SIR GEORGE DARENTH appears, coming from the right, with LADY CHINNERY on his arm. VITELLI turns from the sideboard to receive his guests. DARENTH is a tall, lean, fine-looking old man, still upright. His manner is dignified, if somewhat imperious, and his dress is faultless in an ancient fashion. LADY CHINNERY is a little, fragile old woman, slightly bent. She is wearing a cape, also of a bygone mode, and her head is shrouded in lace ; but notwithstanding her age and feebleness there are traces in her face of former beauty.*)

VITELLI. (*As DARENTH and LADY CHINNERY enter—obsequiously.*) Good evening, sir. Good evening, madame. I hope you are well, sir.

DARENTH. How d'do, Vitelli ? (*Frowning at him.*) You're more grizzled than you were last year. Time hits us all, hey ?

VITELLI. Not you, General. Year after year there is no difference in you, sir ; no difference whatever.

DARENTH. Tscht ! Nonsense.

VITELLI. (*To LADY CHINNERY.*) Madame also? I hope madame is well.

LADY CHINNERY. (*In a timid, gentle voice.*) Thank you, Mr. Vitelli; very well.

(*The waiter, who has placed each of the two portions of melon on a plate, goes out again, closing the door behind him.*)

DARENTH. (*Conducting LADY CHINNERY in a stately way to the settee.*) Pouf! You ought to have a lift here, Vitelli. The stairs are trying. (*He bows over LADY CHINNERY'S hand as he seats her upon the settee, then gives his hat to VITELLI who hangs it on the hat-stand.*) I told your father so repeatedly. (*Drawing off a pair of white gloves and thrusting them into a pocket in his overcoat.*) There's no excuse for you now that he's dead and gone. Hey? What d'ye say?

VITELLI. (*Helping DARENTH to get out of his overcoat.*) Ah, but we are going to make grand improvements at the Café Costanza at the end of the season, General——

DARENTH. (*Wincing.*) My arm——!

VITELLI. Oh——!

DARENTH. Mind my arm, confound you!

VITELLI. Ah, I beg your pardon——

DARENTH. I beg yours, old friend. My arm is rather painful.

VITELLI. (*Hanging the coat on the stand.*) Wonderful improvements. In twelve months, if you do not honour us again before then, you will have the surprise of your life, upon my word. (*To LADY CHINNERY.*) Madame also. (*LADY CHINNERY, having unfastened her cape at the throat, is finding some difficulty in extricating herself from her lace scarf. VITELLI hastens to her assistance.*) Ha! I come!

DARENTH. (*Waving him away.*) No, no; be off. (*Touching the scarf gingerly.*) I'll attend to madam.

(*The waiter reappears, carrying a bowl of caster sugar which VITELLI takes from him and puts on the sideboard. The waiter shuts the door and he and VITELLI then place the portions of melon on the square table.*)

LADY CHINNERY. (*To DARENTH, who at length succeeds in freeing her from the scarf.*) Thank you, George.

DARENTH. (*As he takes the scarf from her.*) D'ye think you're wise, Amy?

LADY CHINNERY. (*Opening her eyes at him.*) Wise, George?

DARENTH. There was a draught in this room last year. (*Raising his voice.*) Vitelli——

VITELLI. (*At the table.*) Yes, General?

DARENTH. (*Folding the scarf.*) There was an infernal draught here last year. D'ye remember, hey; d'ye remember?

VITELLI. (*Penitently.*) Ah, do I not! (*Gesturing towards the fourth wall of the room.*) But to-night I have closed all the windows. There will be no draught to-night, General, I bet a thousand pounds.

(*In dumb show VITELLI directs the waiter to fetch the chair which is standing against the wall on the farther side of the mantelpiece, and to set it at the left of the table. With great care DARENTH lays the scarf on the little round table at the head of the settee. While he is doing this LADY CHINNERY rises and removes her cape, revealing a gown of the Victorian style and her thin arms and shoulders.*)

DARENTH. (*As she gives him her cape—in an undertone, surveying her from head to foot admiringly.*) By Jove! Allow me to compliment you, Amy.

LADY CHINNERY. (*Bashfully.*) Oh, George——!

DARENTH. Charming; perfectly charming! (*To VITELLI.*) Dinner ready?

VITELLI. Yes, General.

(*DARENTH arranges the cape over the end of the settee and, with much ceremony, gives his arm to LADY CHINNERY again and escorts her to the left of the square table, where she sits.*)

DARENTH. (*Waving the waiter aside.*) Tscht, tscht! (*VITELLI fetches the chair from the right-hand wall and places it at the table to face LADY CHINNERY.*) DARENTH

sits.) Thank'ee. Much obliged to you; much obliged. (*Pointing to the flowers.*) Take those stupid flowers away; madam and I can't see each other.

VITELLI. (*Transferring the vase to the sideboard.*) Certainly, General.

DARENTH. (*Smiling at LADY CHINNERY, to whom the waiter is offering the sugar-bowl.*) That's better, hey, Amy?

LADY CHINNERY. (*Smiling back at him.*) Yes, George.

DARENTH. (*Fixing an eyeglass in his eye—sharply.*) Wine-list, Vitelli.

VITELLI. (*Handing him the wine-list, first opening it at "Champagne."*) Paumier—nineteen-fourteen—I recommend it, General. Or if madame prefers something sweeter—Number Thirty-three—ah, it is a capital wine——!

(*The curtain falls while VITELLI is speaking. When it rises again DARENTH and LADY CHINNERY are still seated at the square table, but are alone. The door is closed and the lights are now burning in the sconces, and on the table—everything else having been removed—are two finger-bowls and the remains of dessert, a bottle of brandy, an empty liqueur-glass standing before DARENTH, two empty coffee-cups and some lumps of sugar in a saucer, a box of cigars, and the ash-tray and matches. The sideboard is cleared except for the vase of flowers, a few odd glasses, and the plate-warmer. Upon the latter, though the spirit-lamp is extinguished, are an earthenware coffee-pot and a jug of milk. DARENTH and LADY CHINNERY are leaning back in their chairs lost in reverie. DARENTH, his head bowed, is smoking a cigar, and LADY CHINNERY, with one hand resting on the table and the other hanging by her side, is staring at the carpet. After a moment or two DARENTH rouses himself; whereupon LADY CHINNERY gives a slight start and faces him smilingly.*)

DARENTH. (*Flicking his cigar-ash into the tray.*) By the bye, I've forgotten to ask you, Amy dear—how's your husband?

LADY CHINNERY. (*Her smile fading.*) Thank you, George—only pretty well. His gout, you know—!

DARENTH. (*Nodding.*) Yes, yes, poor devil.

LADY CHINNERY. I am taking him to Kissengen in August. People are going there again.

DARENTH. What's Fred's age? Gettin' on, isn't he?

LADY CHINNERY. Seventy-eight next January.

DARENTH. (*With another nod.*) Two years my junior—more.

LADY CHINNERY. I ought to have asked after your wife, George. How is her neuritis—better?

DARENTH. (*Shaking his head.*) Not a bit. Martyr to it. Keeps her room. We don't see much of each other.

LADY CHINNERY. Poor lady. And she's a great deal younger than I!

DARENTH. No, no; there's dooced little difference between you. Minnie must be close on seventy.

LADY CHINNERY. (*In a whisper—toying with her dessert-knife.*) I am seventy-four, George. I was seventy-four last month.

DARENTH. (*Testily.*) Yes, but you're wonderful; amazing; an exceptional woman. (*Getting up from his chair and walking about.*) You don't change. You don't change an atom, Amy.

LADY CHINNERY. (*Her elbows on the table, shielding her face with her hands.*) Ah, that's absurd, George dear; absurd!

DARENTH. At any rate—I've told you often enough—you're unchanged to me; unchanged to me. (*Halt-ing.*) Marvellous, hey? Fifty years—half a century!—since that ball at Stamford House?

LADY CHINNERY. (*Uncovering her face.*) Fifty-five years, dearest.

DARENTH. Fifty-five! (*Continuing his walk.*) Probert—Charley Probert—presented me to you and your mother. I remember the colour of your frock—pink—

LADY CHINNERY. Blue, dear.

DARENTH. Blue—blue—and the earrings you wore,

and your losing a shoe. I actually recollect the links I had in my shirt-cuffs that night! You admired 'em—turquoise surrounded by brilliants—a gift from my aunt Augusta—I was robbed of 'em at Malta——

LADY CHINNERY. (*In an altered voice.*) George——

DARENTH. (*Coming to her.*) Hey? Hey?

LADY CHINNERY. (*Turning to him and looking up at him with appealing eyes.*) Don't be angry with me; try not to be angry.

DARENTH. Angry——?

LADY CHINNERY. What do you think? (*Laying her hand on his sleeve.*) It's rather late in the day, but I—I've confessed to Fred.

DARENTH. (*Unconcernedly.*) Confessed what to Fred?

LADY CHINNERY. Our annual meetings—that I've dined with my old sweetheart in this place, in a private room, once a year for forty years past.

DARENTH. (*Pulling at his moustache.*) When did you——?

LADY CHINNERY. This evening—just before I started out. He was sitting in the library, nursing his bad leg—
—and I pitied him so—and offered not to leave him—and then—something came over me—the wrongness of being double-faced—the sorrow of having been double-faced, more or less, throughout the whole of my married life—throughout my fifty-two years of married life.

DARENTH. How did he take it? (*Scowling.*) Jealous, I suppose?

LADY CHINNERY. (*Changing her position—in a tone of surprise.*) Not in the least. He didn't seem to care a pin.

DARENTH. Didn't care——!

LADY CHINNERY. (*Hanging her head.*) Of course, I assured him that our meetings—though secret—had always been—absolutely innocent——

DARENTH. (*Stiffly.*) And, pray, what remark had he to make?

LADY CHINNERY. He said that he wished to God my parents had never stepped in and stopped my engagement to you.

DARENTH. A damned uncivil observation!

LADY CHINNERY. He didn't mean to be uncivil. He said that their accursed interference—the dreadful expression is his—their accursed interference had resulted in ruining the happiness of all parties.

DARENTH. All——?

LADY CHINNERY. Mine—yours—his.

DARENTH. *His*——?

LADY CHINNERY. I am afraid he said his.

DARENTH. A most discourteous attitude for a man to adopt towards his wife. (*Stalking to the other side of the table and there flinging away the stump of his cigar and refilling his liqueur-glass with brandy.*) Boorish to a degree! The luckiest beggar that ever walked the earth! Unpardonable!

LADY CHINNERY. (*Tearfully.*) But he's right, George; Fred is quite right, and the blame is at my door. I ought to have defied my father and mother and let you run off with me, as you wanted to. (*DARENTH resumes his seat opposite to her.*) I ought to have had courage, and braved the scandal.

DARENTH. (*Rolling the brandy round in his glass and sniffing it.*) A slip of a thing; I could have carried you in the pocket of my greatcoat!

LADY CHINNERY. Even as it was, all would have been well if chance hadn't thrown us together later, when we were both tied. That was the cruellest stroke.

DARENTH. H'm! That fortnight with the Mactagarts in Scotland, hey?

LADY CHINNERY. But for that I should have become resigned to my fate, and perhaps have been a kinder wife to Fred.

DARENTH. (*Knitting his brows.*) And I—heaven help me!—I might have been more considerate to Minnie occasionally.

LADY CHINNERY. (*Breaking down.*) Oh! Oh! Oh——!

DARENTH. Sssh! Sssh! My darling! My darling——!

LADY CHINNERY. Yes, yes; forgive me. (*Wiping*

her eyes.) I am spoiling our pleasant evening, am I not? (*Brightly, holding out her hand.*) Give me a sip from your glass, George, and I'll drink a toast. Do you mind——?

DARENTH. (*Bowing as he presents his glass to her.*) I am honoured, Amy.

LADY CHINNERY. To our next meeting! (*Raising the glass.*) This night next year! The one night in my year! (*She puts the glass to her lips and takes a sip. It makes her cough. Then, pushing the glass across to him with a light, girlish laugh, she finds him looking at her fixedly and anxiously.*) Won't you drink the toast, George? What—what's the matter?

DARENTH. I—I've something to tell you, Amy; (*examining his finger-nails*) something to—er—to tell you.

LADY CHINNERY. To tell me——?

DARENTH. You see, my dear, when a man gets to my age it's hardly safe to reckon upon a next year—upon a next month, if it comes to *that*.

LADY CHINNERY. (*Faintly.*) No, but—but one hopes, George——

DARENTH. Yes, yes, yes, one hopes; naturally one hopes.

LADY CHINNERY. And prays. (*Suddenly sitting erect.*) You've something to tell me! You're not—ill, are you? (*He shifts in his chair.*) You're ill!

DARENTH. (*Avoiding her gaze.*) Watson—Romer Watson—I've been consulting *him* lately, under advice.

LADY CHINNERY. Romer Watson? Isn't he—heart?

DARENTH. (*Nodding.*) Um. (*After a short silence.*) Heart.

LADY CHINNERY. (*Scarcely breathing.*) W-w-what does Sir Romer——?

DARENTH. Oh, those specialist chaps often scare you unnecessarily; it's their game. No, no; I'll be fair. It's their duty to scare you—to—to warn you. (*Taking a drink of brandy.*) I've no doubt—I've no doubt Watson has spoken—the truth.

(Struggling to her feet, she leaves the table and moves about at the back unsteadily.)

LADY CHINNERY. *(Pressing her temples and uttering a low cry.)* Oh——!

DARENTH. The other day at the club I had a sort of fainting fit. I was ashamed of myself. A ridiculous exhibition! Tscha! *(Draining his glass and starting up and pacing the room again, but so that he does not encounter LADY CHINNERY.)* Hauled about by the hall-porter as if I were an old sheep! An old sheep, b'God! The fellow must have lugged me from where I fell a devil of a distance——!

(Turning, he sees that she has sunk upon the settee. He goes to her and seats himself beside her, and for a while, motionless, they sit staring into space. Then he slowly feels for her hand and clasps it between both of his.)

LADY CHINNERY. *(Almost inaudibly.)* My love! My love! My love!

DARENTH. *(In the same way.)* My dear, dear girl!

LADY CHINNERY. Oh, George, don't go before me; don't—don't go before me!

DARENTH. *(Raising her hand to his lips.)* Anyhow, Amy, whichever of us is left won't have long to wait. We shall soon rejoin one another, my darling; soon rejoin one another.

LADY CHINNERY. *(Eagerly.)* You believe that? Never to separate! You do really believe that?

DARENTH. *(Eyeing her.)* Don't you; don't you, hey?

LADY CHINNERY. *(Feebly.)* We were taught to believe in a beautiful hereafter when we were young, George. *(Shivering.)* But now such upsetting things are written and uttered; such terribly disturbing things.

DARENTH. *(Groaning.)* Yes, why couldn't they have let us alone—we that had—whatd'yecallit?—faith—a simple faith that comforted us and did harm to nobody?

LADY CHINNERY. Still, we've only to resolve *not* to be shaken—to refuse to be shaken——

DARENTH. That's it—to hold on in spite of the questioners!

LADY CHINNERY. To hold on with all our might; though the waves dash against us, to cling!

DARENTH. (*Screwing up his mouth.*) Of course, there are points that we can't attempt to solve here—difficult points that I presume will be settled for us satisfactorily at the proper time.

LADY CHINNERY. Difficult——?

DARENTH. (*His brow overclouded.*) For instance, there's Fred. A decent chap, I freely admit, and as much deserving a place up above as myself. *He'll be there.*

LADY CHINNERY. I—I should be miserable if he weren't, George dear.

DARENTH. And yet it's to me you belong, Amy. (*Rubbing his head.*) How the dooce these human relationships will be adjusted in a future state is beyond conjecture.

LADY CHINNERY. (*Equally troubled.*) And then—there's your wife.

DARENTH. By Jove, yes; there's Minnie!

LADY CHINNERY. A good woman; far superior to me, I am sure.

DARENTH. (*A little impatiently.*) Good as gold; good as gold.

LADY CHINNERY. Lady Darenth will be there.

DARENTH. (*With a fidgety movement.*) Inevitably; inevitably. (*Taking out his watch.*) However, for an invalid, Minnie has always been an amiable, submissive creature, and I don't apprehend—— (*showing his watch to LADY CHINNERY*) ah——!

LADY CHINNERY. (*Raising and dropping her hands piteously.*) Ah——!

(DARENTH rises and goes to the bell-push, which is on the left of the door, and rings the bell. Then he fetches LADY CHINNERY'S scarf from the round table and unfolds it and gives it to her.)

DARENTH. (*Heavily.*) Amy dear——

LADY CHINNERY. (*Proceeding to wrap her head up.*) Thank you, George.

DARENTH. Amy, I wonder whether, in the altered circumstances, Fred would permit me to visit you in Eaton Square sometimes. It would be a gracious act on his part.

LADY CHINNERY. (*Weeping softly.*) I—I—I'll speak to him the first thing in the morning, d—d—directly he has had his bath.

DARENTH. (*Taking up her cape.*) Old Fred and I used to be great chums—before he dared to propose for you. (*She rises and he arranges the cape upon her shoulders.*) Many a frolic we've had in early days; many, many a spree. (*He goes to the hat-stand, puts on his hat, and returns to her carrying his overcoat. She helps him into it.*) Thank you, Amy; thank you, my darling.

(*The waiter enters.*)

THE WAITER. (*Advancing, leaving the door open.*) Yessir; you ring, sir?

DARENTH. (*Taking a pound note from his note-case and giving it to the man.*) For yourself. Ask Mr. Vitelli to post my bill to me to-morrow.

THE WAITER. Yessir. (*Pocketing the note.*) T'ank you, sir, vairy much.

(*VITELLI bustles in.*)

VITELLI. Ah, you are going, General! I hope you have enjoyed your dinner. Madame also.

DARENTH. Excellent dinner; excellent. Everything of the best.

VITELLI. (*Delighted.*) Ha! The Café Costanza —!

DARENTH. (*Giving his arm to LADY CHINNERY.*) Send my bill to me to-morrow, please, as usual.

VITELLI. And we see you this night next year, General, if not sooner? (*Jocularly.*) Ha, ha! This night next year, if we are all alive!

DARENTH. (*Pausing at the door.*) Exactly—if we are all alive, Vitelli.

(*He passes out with LADY CHINNERY. VITELLI follows them, chuckling, while the waiter, having tucked the box of cigars under his arm, picks up the bottle of brandy.*)

THE END.

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